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The Arrogance Of Iran

The Reagan administration's response to terrorist attacks against Americans has become as stylized as a minuet, and just about as effective. There is the initial shock, expressions of grief and anger, followed by tough talk from the administration about getting to the root of terrorism. Then nothing.

The Christmastime attacks at the Rome and Vienna airports, which left five Americans—including an 11-year-old girl—dead, followed this pattern of impotence step by dreary step. In that instance, the president poured out his rhetorical rage on Libya, while cautiously ignoring the equally guilty Iranians and Syrians. The United States imposed sanctions on Libya—but there was no retaliation.

Iran, in particular, has grown fearless to the point of arrogance in thumbing its nose at America. Few episodes were more revealing than the behind-the-scenes exchange of last March between Secretary of State George Shultz and Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mussavi.

Concerned about American hostages being held by Iranian-controlled terrorists, Shultz sent a stern secret message to the foreign ministry in Tehran by way of a Swiss diplomat. It warned the Khomeini regime that it would "suffer the consequences" if any harm befell the American hostages.

Partly in response to Shultz's secret threat, the Iranian prime minister took to the airwaves on May 28 to ridicule the United States. Even as he spoke, he was probably aware, our sources say, that the plan to hijack TWA Flight 847 had already been set in motion.

Prime Minister Mussavi—related to the terrorist family of Lebanese Mussevis who have plotted nearly every attack on Americans in the Middle East since April 1983—was quoted on the Iranian radio as saying:

"The United States cannot do a damn thing about these threats or through other actions. We have many times punched the United States in the mouth, and we are ready to do this once again over the world. The United States must know that we are able to turn the Persian Gulf into a quicksand for them to drown in."

Actually, Mussavi himself must know that U.S. intelligence has pointed the exact location of terrorist training centers in Iran that would be ideal targets for military retaliation. In their sublime self-confidence, the Iranians haven't gone to any great lengths to hide the camps, even featuring them occasionally in broadcasts and interviews with recruits.

Mussavi's wife, Zahra Rahnevard, is the director of one training camp: Beheshtua, west of Tehran. The camp's specialty is training non-Iranian female terrorists. According to reports smuggled out of Iran, Mussavi's wife is about 30 years old and was initially trained in Palestinian guerrilla camps. Though she coordinates training programs throughout Iran, she concentrates on Beheshtua, which at any one time has about 300 women between 17 and 35 from all over the world.

U.S. intelligence is aware of more than a dozen terrorist training centers in Iran, including at least seven for women. From secret CIA reports and our own sources deep inside Iran, we have learned the camp locations. They include:

■ Vakilabad, in Khorasan province near the city of Meshed. Once used to hold Iraqi prisoners of war, it was converted into a terrorist training center in 1984. On the tarmac at a small airport, two Iran Air jetliners are parked for use in practice hijackings.

One of those who trained at Vakilabad was Ali Atwa, the would-be hijacker who missed TWA Flight 847 at the Athens airport. He was arrested there, but was later released to join his comrades. Atwa had spent at least two weeks in the Vakilabad camp, learning airliner cabin layout and controls, and then took a three-day course at Manzaryeh Park, near the Ayatollah Khomeini's Tehran residence.

■ Two other centers specializing in hijacking courses are located near Tehran's Mehrabad airport and near Shiraz in southern Iran. From Saudi Arabian intelligence, the CIA believes the Iranians have trained at least 400 airplane hijackers, many of them non-Iranians.

■ A special training center near Tehran is called Tariq al Qhods, where Iraqi prisoners are brainwashed and sent to fight their countrymen. A pro-Iranian terror group, Al Dawa, trains many recruits there, although activities cease when foreign emissaries come to visit the Iraqi POWs.

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